Workers Struggles: The Americas

3 March 2015

Latin America

Police attack, arrest protesting Mexican teachers

Protests in the Mexican state of Guerrero were met with police violence last week, with scores of arrests, police brutality and one death. The demonstrations were organized mainly by the CETEG teachers union.

The first protest, on February 24, was held on a road to the Acapulco airport. Among the issues that the educators and their supporters were demonstrating about were unpaid wages, the educational “reforms” promoted by President Enrique Peña Nieto, continuing gang violence against teachers and the September disappearance of the 43 students in Iguala, about 100 miles to the north.

When protesters blocked the road to the airport, police arrested over 100. Later that night, a bus drove into a crowd of police and protesters, and police brutally attacked the demonstrators. Photos from the scene show bloodied teachers being manhandled by the police.

The Interior Ministry accused the protesters of using the bus to attack police, a charge that CETEG denies. CETEG charges that over 500 teachers and students were injured by police, and that police had sexually assaulted four women. Eleven teachers were reported missing as well.

One 65-year-old retired teacher, Claudio Castillo Peña, died of injuries to the head inflicted early in the morning of February 25. Witnesses said that the police had beaten Castillo Peña to death. An autopsy reported that his thorax and abdomen had been crushed as well. Federal authorities now claim that a vehicle struck him.

The next day, about 1,000 teachers marched and held a rally in front of the office of the Federal Police to demand an investigation into Castillo Peña’s death and to denounce the police violence.

Brazilian truckers’ strike over fuel tax hike, freight rates continues

Strikes and blockades by truckers in the southern Brazilian states of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, Parana and Mato Grosso do Sul continue, despite the signing of an agreement, court injunctions and police repression.

The truckers began their strike on February 18 to protest a diesel fuel tax increase imposed on February 1 that they say will drive some of them out of business. They are also demanding higher payments for freight deliveries.

Truckers set up blockades on major highways used to transport soybeans, corn and other agricultural products to Santos, a port in São Paulo. By February 25, the protests had spread to 10 states, delaying shipments to ports as well as deliveries of fuel and supplies to farmers, resulting in interruptions of harvests and slowing of soybean and corn exports.

One protester in Rio Grande do Sul, where protesters torched a tire truck, was killed on February 25 when he was struck by a truck that ran a blockade.

Later that day, the government and representatives of some of the truckers signed an agreement that would extend the time that truckers pay off their loans and would freeze diesel prices. However, the agreement only covered members of the Brazilian Autonomous Truckers Confederation, and those not covered continued their action.

By February 28, there were 46 blockades still in effect. In nine states, prosecutors obtained court injunctions against the truckers. In Rio Grande do Sul, the Federal highway police and the National Security Force used tear gas and batons to break up blockades and arrested at least eight people on March 1. The number of blockades decreased, with most of the remaining ones in three states: Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina and Parana.

The government has announced that it will send more police to break up the blockades, and steep fines will be levied against owners of blockading vehicles.

Brazilian auto workers return to work after company modifies layoff schedule

Workers at southeastern Brazil’s General Motors auto plant in São Jose dos Campos ended their protest strike over the planned layoffs of almost 800 workers. The February 26 assembly vote followed an agreement between the Steelworkers Union and the company to change the timetable for the layoffs.

Instead of laying off the 794 workers with no guarantees of being rehired, GM promised to furlough 650 workers for five months with full pay, and rehire them for another three months. Reporting did not provide details on the workers’ fate after the three-month reinstatement.

Disunity among Argentine teachers unions over parity talk offers

Last week, parity talks across Argentina between provincial governments and teachers unions took place. Some unions accepted government salary proposals, while others rejected them.

In Buenos Aires, the Buenos Aires Province Education Workers Union (Suteba), the Argentine Private Teachers Union (Sadop), the Argentine Teachers Union (Uda) and the Technical Education Teachers Union (Amet) voted to accept the government’s offer in time to begin the new school year on Monday. However, members of the Buenos Aires Educators Federation (FEB) and the Buenos Aires Province Teachers Union (UDOCBA) voted against the offer.

Suteba leader Roberto Baradel claimed that the increase would put teachers’ base monthly salary at 7,000 pesos (US$802), a 40.56 percent raise in 2015 and an average of 36 percent for “all positions, from grade school teacher, professors, directors." He also asserted that retired teachers would be included in the raise, and that 300 million pesos (US$34 million) would be invested in infrastructure improvements.

FEB head Mirta Petrocini, explaining her members' rejection of the offer, said that "there is flattening of the salary scale and we cannot accept the period for the raise," specifically, the payment in two stages. FEB and UDOCBA called for 48-hour strikes on Monday and Tuesday.

Meanwhile, in Santa Fe province, Sadop, Amet and Uda provincial branches called a two-day strike for Monday and Tuesday despite their national federations' agreement to a 27 percent base salary raise. Amsafe, a provincial union, also called for a two-day walkout.

In both cases, the provincial Labor Ministries decreed a 15-day cooling-off period, ordered "obligatory conciliation" talks and threatened to dock pay for time spent on strike.

Belize: Sickout by air traffic controllers highlights dispute over pay, working conditions

Air traffic controllers at Belize's Phillip Goldson International Airport, or PGIA, held a sickout on February 21 to protest long working hours, decaying infrastructure, low wages and cronyism. At least six flights were canceled and others diverted to Honduras and Guatemala. The action lasted twelve hours, accounting for two six-hour shifts from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The next day, an organization called Citizens Organized for Liberty through Action (COLA) issued a press release stating that the PGIA sickout "has for us raised awareness of the value and importance of a thankless job."

The COLA statement pointed out that some controllers work "for as many as 18 hours in a 24-hour day," that municipal flights are uncontrolled and outside the purview of air traffic controllers, resulting in some near-collisions with major aircraft, that there is seriously insufficient staff in the control tower and radar room, and that equipment is poor.

Another complaint is that the Department of Civil Aviation hires political cronies instead of "individuals who are enthusiastic and aggressive so that within 2-to-3 years they can reach the requirement to work in the control tower and eventually the radar room." At the same time, a recent salary raise for public officers has not reached the controllers.

In 2009, the government approved the Essential Services Amendment Bill, making it illegal for essential service employees to stage strikes, sickouts or slowdowns. The CEO of the Ministry of Tourism, Tracy Taegar-Panton, said that "there are repercussions for such actions to be taken and we will have to address the matter as soon as we are able to ascertain really what has caused this event." The Industrial Relations Officer for the Public Service, Ray Davis, called the action an "unhappy convergence of circumstances." He claimed that the controllers were "not boycotting or doing anything like that to call attention to anything."

United States

Part-time professors hold nationwide actions to call attention to exploitation

Adjunct professors at a number of university campuses across the US held activities February 25, including walkouts, to highlight the plight of the super-exploited part-time professors that now comprise the majority of faculty on campuses. Adjunct faculty, who perform the same tasks as full-time, tenured faculty, now comprise 75 percent of the 1.8 million instructors at colleges and universities.

Many work without any benefits and are essentially temp workers working from semester to semester without a contract and subject to termination at management whim. The median salary per three-credit course is $2,700. For an adjunct professor who teaches four classes per semester, the projected annual salary is $21,600—a figure below the federal poverty line.

At Seattle University, where 55 percent of the faculty are adjunct professors, hundreds of professors and students walked out of classes. Louisa Edgerly, who teaches part-time at Seattle University, told *Democracy Now!*, "[A]cross the board, we are paid less than our tenure-track colleagues. We have few, sometimes no, benefits, sometimes no office space, very little time to meet with students. Many of us end up having to work multiple jobs at different campuses just in order to make ends meet."

In New York, where state law bans adjunct professor strikes, professors held a variety of events to raise awareness of their plight. Karen Hildebrand at State University of New York at Plattsburgh, said, "I have been a temp for 20 years… Adjunct instructors, in case you are unaware, are part-time instructors in colleges and universities. (Trust academia to give a fancy name to a temp.) Adjuncts are paid by the course and hired by the semester. But they're an entrenched part of the system. The trend of hiring adjuncts has grown. They now comprise over half of instructors in higher education."

Canada

Air Canada maneuvers for early lockout

Continuing an offensive against transport workers that saw the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper move to table anti-strike legislation last month against striking locomotive engineers at Canadian Pacific Railways, Air Canada—in an unprecedented move—has rushed an application to the government for contract conciliation in talks with 4,100 customer sales and service agents organized by Unifor.

With contract discussions opened just two weeks ago, Air Canada management is seeking to move forward the date for a lockout or strike even though no impasse has been reached in the early stages of collective bargaining. By applying so early for conciliation, the company can be in a position to lock out its workers by late May. Buoyed by the government's record of forcing workers into binding arbitration and the refusal of Canadian unions to fight back-to-work legislation, Air Canada management has strategized that moving a lockout date forward will bring labour negotiations to a head before the beginning of its lucrative summer flying season.

Air Canada has over the past several years depended on government interventions and the acquiescence of union leaders to force contracts through that are favourable to the company. In March 2012, the government issued a cease-and-desist order against a wildcat strike by baggage handlers. Earlier that same month, it illegalized job actions by 8,600 Air Canada ground crew workers and 3,000 pilots through a spurious request to the industrial relations board to rule on whether a strike or lockout would endanger the "health and safety" of Canadians.

Soon after, the Conservatives rammed legislation through parliament suspending the workers' right to strike. The anti-strike law included language that made it inevitable that concessions would be imposed on workers. It stipulated that the new contracts must "ensure the short and long-term viability and competitiveness" of the company and guarantee "the sustainability of the employer's pension plan," a euphemism for pension cuts, increased worker contributions, and the introduction of a defined-contribution scheme for low-seniority workers.

The government made similar pro-company interventions against Air Canada Customer Sales and Service Agents in 2011, using the threat of a government-imposed settlement to push the CAW (predecessor to Unifor) into yet another concessions deal. This was the same tactic used against flight attendants when they threatened to strike in October 2011.